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An Employer's View of Property

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THE Christian ethic makes demand upon all men to act as if in a brotherhood. If this demand is to be granted any practical meaning it must be that each man's life is expected to deliver its maximum service towards the truest good of all men. To approach this objective each man must be more and more nearly fitted into the place best suited to his abilities, and spurred by the influences most appropriate to his make-up; and all men, but especially leaders, must have a more definite, more practical, and more uniform notion of what does actually tend towards the truest good of all.

If there can be any such applied science as social engineering, its ultimate objective cannot differ much from this demand of the Christian ethic. The problems of the ownership and of the control of property are for the Christian teacher and social engineer alike problems of organizing the forces and influences which work upon men so that they will lead towards a progressively greater utilization of the powers of each individual for the deepest good of all.

Of the two commonly accepted privileges attaching to the ownership of property, control of its use and ownership of its fruits, the former can most profitably receive the present focus of attention. Only if long and ingenious efforts should fail to modify the control of wealth would ownership of the fruits of wealth constitute a problem; namely, the problem of the basic rights of ownership, so long debated by socialist, communist, and individualist, with high passion and meager profit.

It is admitted as a basic theory in all democratic communities that there are

somewhere limits to the freedom with which one can control his own property, bounds beyond which he cannot "do what he likes with his own," though the variety of its definite applications obscures the basic unity. Ordinarily we hear that every man's right is to do as he pleases with his own so long as he does not interfere with the rights of others, the rights of others being of course to do as they please with their own, short of similar interference. At best this can cover only the simplest situations and can give no help where rights conflict or where a democratic society must decide to what extent it will guard ownership and protect its transfer. A Christian society which does not go further than this would warrant the few who own material wealth in withholding it to the beggary or death of the rest.

The Christian ethic cannot allow the use of property to the harm of another. Can it approve its use for anything less than the greatest service which may be practicable? Doing actual harm and withholding good never differ more than in degree and are sometimes indistinguishable; and if both Christianity and social engineering demand that each must deliver his maximum service to all, the limits to what one may please to do must crowd so close to his duties that we may as well say at once that "he may do what he *ought* with his own."

Precisely what ought he to do? Can we, who with difficulty see ahead twelve months, who know little or nothing of the dynamics of our present structure, attempt to define some form of social structure which might be called a goal? It is out of all reason. We can, how-

ever, see present imperfections, and work towards their elimination. We can use property for greater service even when we cannot yet picture its greatest service. We can choose continuous progress rather than attainment as the object of our striving. If we can see how to increase the use of the talents and properties of men for the deeper good of all, or how to increase the extent of unselfish purpose (that store of energy which drives us out of beastdom), we may safely leave detailed drawings of some future social structure to the utopians.

For progress must be recognized as the product of good purpose and structural improvement; when either factor is zero the product is zero; when one factor is negative, the result is negative. In none of our efforts towards the greater welfare of man can this fact be forgotten. Both structure and pur-

pose must be strengthened, and, in a democratic type of society, strengthened broadly throughout the group. For if autocracy can get a high degree of initiative in the men at its top, democracy finds a greater total in lower degrees throughout its whole mass.

The doctrine of brotherhood, which is implicit in any belief in the fatherhood of God, confirms the tenets of sound social engineering in demanding of the possessors of skill, of talent or of properties, that they be used in steadily increasing measure in real and true service to mankind. It demands of men of power and ability such a directing of the work of all men that their good services may increase and their good purposes strengthen. It demands of each man a continuous broadening of his own good purposes and their consecration in service.